

Testimony for DD Division Budget

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Thank you for the many long hours you have already given to your representation of the people of Montana during this legislature. Thank you for also the sacrifice of your personal and family lives to the people of Montana, especially to those Montanans who can't vote or voice their concerns to you nor advocate for their needs today, not because they don't want to but because of the severity of cognitive and language limitations. It makes me humble and honored to represent them and especially my son, Josh, age 35, who lives in a very unique support corporation in Missoula, along with about 60 others like him. Josh's picture is on the bottom of my written testimony.

My name is Doug Cochran-Roberts and I live with my wife and mother-in-law in Missoula and work in the Corvallis Schools. I have been a school psychologist for 26 years. My wife and I were twenty and twenty-one when Josh arrived 35 years ago. It has been a long, hard and wonderful journey to be the best mom and dad possible for Josh. Many folks have helped along the way, as will you, in your consideration of Josh's needs.

Josh is an amazing man and has had an amazing influence on my wife and I, his brother and two sisters, my extended family and our friends. Josh has also been a beacon for what life should be about for myself, my family and others around him. He is a wonderful model for us as he deals with his challenges. He never complains, although he has much to complain about. Josh's capability on a good day is like a young toddler. He has always been like a young child due to his mental retardation, but his degenerative brain disease has caused his independence to decline -- much like an older person with brain dementia.

After leaving our home at seventeen, Josh has lived in a group home in Missoula since 1991. This group home is one of eight group homes supported by the Missoula Development Service Corporation or MDSC. As I said already, MDSC is a very unique, community based support system, which serves about 60 adults -- many having the most challenging behaviors and medical needs in the state. About half of these folks once lived in the state institution at Boulder.

Most of the clients, like Josh, can't tell you what they need. Consequently, the staff has to have some of the most sophisticated skills in understanding what their behavior is trying to say about what they feel, what they like and don't like, and what they need. Consequently, we need to hire very unique people who will stay at the job long enough to develop these skills and to develop the essential positive connections to care, understand and guide these folks. Here's where you can help. **We need adequate funding to provide this special training and funding to pay a very competitive wage -- more than what they are getting now. Please help us with these two things.**

Josh lives 20 minutes from our home. He comes home one evening a week. Besides just wanting to be with him, we must keep a close eye on his medical condition. We can't seem to control his grand mal seizures after trying 15 different seizure medicines. My wife even carries a beeper to receive calls from the group home in case of seizures or other concerns. Josh is like a slowly declining older person in a nursing home -- who can't tell you what he needs. Since Josh can't tell us when and where he hurts, it is always a guessing game trying to keep him healthy. If you have cared for a declining parent in a nursing home you will surely appreciate how important it is to stay on top of the care that is given by someone else.

Obviously, Josh's medical needs are great and his mother and I will continue to be vigilant to help the ever- changing group home staff learn to care for him. However, this is where you come in. We need your help in encouraging the DD division administration change their newly proposed funding system to become more flexible. It's too complicated for me to understand, let alone, explain. **Would you visit with some providers and also visit with state officials to become better informed about the reasons for these changes and the impact of these changes of the providers? Hopefully, the DD administration and providers will find a reasonable compromise.**

Let me describe the impact of the funding change to Josh and others like him. Josh's support organization would lose revenue if we continue these weekly visits to our home or to the hospital -- which can happen at least 1-2 times a year. Also, the new funding formula would not permit the corporation to keep sufficient money to absorb the extra costs if Josh or others in his group would need extra support for declining health, very challenging behaviors or visits to the hospital. The new funding system would require a corporation to have to request and prove the need for emergency funds -- adding to the burden of more time and paperwork to an already difficult system of revenue generation. Josh's visits to our home or to the hospital would add to the tight budgeting strings of the proposed funding formula.

Let me close. I'm a rookie in giving testimony at the legislature and watching -- in person -- how decisions are made. I've watched legislative action through the media, which I know is often a very incomplete picture of what you do each day and how you come to your decisions. Let me encourage you to avoid partisan decision-making about Josh's needs and the needs of these 'voice-less', vulnerable and wonderful people of Montana.

If you look at the picture of Josh on the back of my written testimony you will see him sitting with his mother after opening some birthday presents. As you can see, he still loves Sesame Street Scooby Doo and his favorite thing is the American flag. His eighty-six year old grandfather loves this about Josh. His grandfather, my dad, lives in the Bitterroot Valley and is a retired Air Force colonel. He fought bravely for this flag Josh loves so much while in a P-38 fighter over the beaches of Normandy and over the countryside of France. My dad is also a staunch Republican and we can differ on some issues. But the importance of Josh getting what he needs is something we both agree on. I hope you can join with your colleagues and do the same thing.

